FEDERICO WINDHAUSEN

At the end of the 1990s, New York City's experimental-film scene seemed to be undergoing a revitalization, sparked by alternative screening venues such as the Robert Beck Memorial Cinema on the Lower East Side and Ocularis in Williamsburg, as well as programming initiatives at local museums, including *The Cool World*, the Whitney's extensive survey of American experimental film and video art. A round-table of critics, curators, and practitioners, convened in 2000 by *The Village Voice* to consider this development, gave the overall impression of a thriving community with a catholic appreciation of different moving-image media. When critic J. Hoberman asked the group whether the film-video distinction was "still even an issue," the answers were fairly prosaic, touching on the preference for format hybridity among students and the lack of acceptable video projection in classrooms. Doubtless aware of the long history of internal dissent and cross-disciplinary carping within such circles, Hoberman capped the whole exchange by labeling it "very polite."[1]

Presumably also aware that medium-specificity had functioned as a discursive flash point for many years in experimental-film communities, Hoberman noted, in a brief postscript published later, that "the unexpected popularity" of the MoMA's *Big As Life* retrospective of 8mm experimental film, "along with such other instances as Stan Brakhage's frame-by-frame painting or the very different projection pieces orchestrated by Ken Jacobs and Luis Recoder . . . served as an example of 'film outliving its death.'"[2]

Roughly six months later, in *The New York Press*, critic and programmer Ed Halter also addressed the continuing relevance of photochemical film, but the position he articulates sharply contrasts with the roundtable's picture of equable pluralism. In a mixed review of "Views from the Avant-Garde," the New York Film Festival's annual experimental-film sidebar, Halter disputes the value of sustaining and supporting experimentation in celluloid:

> Unlike the dynamic Video Festival [held at the same venue the previous summer], which screened everything from subcultural docudramas to structural feminist essays to manic performance tapes, the film-only

1. J. Hoberman, "Attack of the Mutants," *The Village Voice* (March 14, 2000), p. 116.
2. J. Hoberman, "Urban Legends," *The Village Voice* (March 28, 2000), p. 113.

"Views from the Avant-Garde" plays out one long, somber note of funere-
al formalism. The videomakers look both forward and back in time for
inspiration, while almost every experimental film here wallows in death-
of-film nostalgia. There's also the intrinsic limits of a dying medium. Only
so many times can one gush about the colors of Super 8, the possibilities
of found-footage collage, or the Tinkertoy wonders of emulsion-scratch-
ing and hand-processing before most of the films seem like unadventur-
ous repetitions of familiar formal elements. The current avant-boom is
decisively multiformat. While there may always be a few new hardline cel-
luloid geniuses in the retro genre of experimental film, perhaps it's time
to concede that, for film, the experiment is over.[3]

This polemic is less interesting for its reduction of experimental film to a "retro
genre" than for the historical trajectory it proposes. When making the claim that
every medium with "intrinsic limits" reaches a terminal point, Halter provides his
own version of a narrative of medium-specific ascension and decline that began to
appear with greater frequency in writing on avant-garde film around the 1970s. The
appeal of such a chronicle lies partly in its tidy finality, and in retrospect, the timing
of its reemergence—during a moment of rapidly increasing interest in relatively
affordable digital-video equipment and editing software among experimental film-
makers—is telling. It suggests that, when experimental-film culture perceives itself to
be moving away from its reliance on a formerly dominant set of materials or tech-
nologies, those who criticize contemporary work on aesthetic grounds will seek to
support their views with generalizations about the end of a particular history.

Over a decade later, one still reads that digital technology generated for exper-
imental filmmakers a "crisis," which represented "the last of a series of shocks that
have rattled avant-garde film since the mid-'70s."[4] And yet, by its 2010 edition,
"Views" had become so "multiformat" that only one its many multiple-artist pro-
grams was composed entirely of films; it could no longer be characterized or
caricatured as the last prominent defender of the belief, articulated most recently by
scholar Jonathan Walley, that "among avant-garde filmmakers . . . film is the cen-
ter of artistic practice."[5] In expanding to allow contemporary film and video to

3.   Ed Halter, "Views from the Avant-Garde," *The New York Press* (October 11, 2000), http://
www.nypress.com/article-2547-views-from-the-avant-garde.html (accessed March 1, 2011). The 2000 edi-
tion of "Views," which Halter was not reviewing in its entirety, included films by Mary Beth Reed,
Barbara Sternberg, Kerry Laitala, David Matarasso, Janie Geiser, Dietmar Brehm, and Mark LaPore,
among others. The curators were (and still are) Mark McElhatten and Gavin Smith.
4.   David E. James, "Imposing Technologies," *Artforum* 48, no. 9 (May 2010), p. 104. James is addressing
modes of production in particular. He describes the mid-1970s as the moment when "agitational identity
politics coincided with the emergence of videotape to superannuate medium-specific structural film."
5.   Jonathan Walley, "Modes of Film Practice in the Avant-Garde," in *Art and the Moving Image: A
Critical Reader*, ed. Tanya Leighton (London: Tate Publishing/Afterall, 2008), p. 189. The all-film pro-
gram at "Views" included work by Nathaniel Dorsky, Christopher Becks, Robert Beavers, Ute Aurand,
David Gatten, Jonathan Schwartz, Tomonari Nishikawa, Malena Szlam, Eve Heller, Peter Herwitz, and
Jim Jennings.

co-exist more or less equally, "Views" participated in a more broadly based transformation, also on display at festivals such as Ann Arbor and Oberhausen, where an affiliation with experimental-film culture is not seen as incompatible with programming that combines digital and analogue sources for moving images. Because many older practitioners initially trained in film now submit work in digital formats on a regular basis, the curators of these events have not been forced to choose between established filmmakers and those who represent younger generations in order to accommodate video. In addition, the increased reliance on video has facilitated the inclusion of more artists associated with video art (such as Dani Leventhal at "Views" in 2010), suggesting that the divide between video makers and filmmakers drawn earlier by Halter has been bridged by a greater degree of diversity and acceptance.[6] Yet the curatorial emphasis remains on those who screen their work primarily on the experimental-film circuit, rather than in art-world venues.

Few today would dispute that digital video has been assimilated into experimental-film practice, although little has been written about motivating factors or possible determinants. For some, the growing significance of digital video is indicative of a surprising break from formerly dominant attitudes within an experimental-film scene that often derided video in its analogue (and early digital) manifestations; for others, it reflects the extent to which the avant-garde has demonstrated itself capable of reconfiguring its practices and techniques without relinquishing its core values. I hold the latter view, and in what follows, I provide one of many possible prehistories of the contemporary situation, followed by a brief case study focused on Ernie Gehr's digital video *Crystal Palace* (2002). Both the prehistory and the case study are intended to show where adaptive tendencies appear within experimental-film practice and what they allow filmmakers to continue doing. Since the polemical dimension of avant-garde discourse tends to obscure such tendencies and continuities, I begin by addressing experimental film's professed resistance to video.

<div align="center">*</div>

In contrast to the contemporary critics and theorists who claim that video "is no longer the medium with inherent properties"[7] and that it "has no coherent

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6.   In addition, within the work being produced in digital video by experimental filmmakers, various aesthetic affinities with video art have become more pronounced. Filmmakers are more likely to present their own bodies carrying out performative tasks, for instance, as Scott Stark does in his *Chop* (2003) and *Shape Shift* (2004); they are also extending and expanding a tradition of appropriating from television that has not previously been considered a major strain of experimental film. For examples of the latter, see the work of Michael Robinson.

7.   Margaret Morse, "Alan Rath, Jim Campbell, and Rebecca Bollinger," in *Radical Light: Alternative Film and Video in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1945–2000*, ed. Steve Anker, Kathy Geritz, and Steve Seid (Berkeley: University of California, 2010), p. 312.

apparatus structure,"[8] filmmakers offering negative appraisals of the medium have confidently identified its more objectionable qualities since the era of the Sony Portapak. Historically, an especially popular target for the antagonists has been the analogue video image, which lacks the detail, definition, and "textures" of projected film.[9] Among analogue moving-image formats, only film could claim to provide, with consistency and regularity, the option of high-resolution visuals, a feature considered essential by many experimental filmmakers, even those who elected to treat this attribute as a dominant norm worthy of being rejected on a regular basis in favor of degraded or opaque imagery.

Filmmakers' objections have also gone beyond the aesthetics of the image, encompassing questions of technological design and use, often in order to address the implications of certain normative practices of making and viewing video. Writing in the year of Hoberman's and Halter's texts, filmmaker Scott Stark lamented that videotape allows for mistakes to be easily erased or corrected and that analogue-video technology generates imagery "through some mysterious electronic process that [can't] be seen or touched." In a declaration reminiscent of Hollis Frampton's well-known comparison of video to the black box of radar, Stark continues:

> And now, in the year 2000, digital video requires an even more complex and impersonal apparatus, further distancing makers from the physical processes involved in creating and recording images. Sophisticated internal motors reduce camera shakiness. Exposure and focus are instantaneous, automatic and exact. Sound precludes a need for visual cues. Images do not exist without the machines and software required to interpret binary data.
>
> Technology, driven by commerce and a thirst for efficiency, endlessly attempts to eradicate any lingering traces of humanity from the craft of cinema. History is rewritten to accommodate the trend of the moment.
>
> Any personal vision in contemporary moviemaking must now come solely from its content, not its form.[10]

8.   Yvonne Spielmann, "Video: From Technology to Medium," *Art Journal* 65, no. 3 (Fall 2006), p. 58.
9.   The following is but one among many similar statements made in the context of a critique of analogue video: "Film is a special and unique experience—the experience of projected light in the dark space—the interaction of this with the chemistry of the film strip, the intermittent action of the projector mechanism, and the abstraction of the real world through the physics of lens and camera and the chemistry of the film stock and processing." Katerina Thomadaki and Maria Klonaris, "Call for the Defence of Super 8," quoted in Arthur and Corinne Cantrill, "Film—The Medium About to Be Lost," *Independent Eye* 10, no. 1 (Fall 1988), p. 5. For a skeptical response to digital video, see Nicky Hamlyn, *Film Art Phenomena* (London: BFI, 2003), pp. 9–14.
10.   Scott Stark, "The Middle Six Feet: The Birth and Demise of Regular-8 Film and Personal Cinema," initially posted on the Internet discussion list Frameworks on February 8, 2000, now available at: http://www.hi-beam.net/hi-beam/middle6feet.html (accessed March 1, 2011).

Invoking conceptual oppositions familiar to those who keep track of the rhetorical tendencies of experimental filmmakers, Stark sets the artisanal against the "automatic," a term connoting habits and norms of use that follow the dictates of industrial design. Within this particular narrative of decline (countering Halter *avant la lettre*), the increased alienation of the filmmaker from materially specific operations of construction is also an imposed estrangement from a diverse history of media and practices designated obsolete by "commerce."

Stark's views regarding video would appear to place him in the camp of the celluloid holdouts, yet his filmography includes analogue videos and at least a dozen recent digital pieces. This apparent gap, between a filmmaker's evaluative assertions of a given medium and the attitudes that actively shape his work, is the product of an interplay of resistance and adaptability, of theoretical entrenchment and practical compromise, that can be located throughout experimental-film culture since the 1960s. If the dynamic between polemic and practice is less apparent in the era of digital video than it had been in earlier periods, this is due in part to the dwindling number of contemporary filmmakers who write theoretical texts. In order to delve into the workings of this logic, we can look to Stark's main objective, which is not to denigrate video but rather to argue for the virtues of the film gauge of regular 8mm.

The design of regular 8mm film requires manual treatment of a sort rarely encountered in film practice, and Stark makes clear that this is where he locates its value and specificity as a film gauge. Because standard or regular 8mm film is, in essence, 16mm film with smaller perforations, only one half of the film is exposed in the spool's first run through the camera. In order to shoot onto the second half of the strip, the filmmaker must open the camera, flip the roll over, and rethread the film, thereby generating a "middle six feet or so" that bear the traces of having been directly manipulated. Often displaying fogged images or light flares and "sometimes bathed in a sublime, supernatural light," this portion of the film is interpreted by Stark as a unique "record of human interaction with the technology, right in the middle of the reel"; he sees it as the "most distinctive feature of regular-8mm filmmaking." In addition, both of the medium-specific features that Stark discusses—the handling of a roll of regular 8mm and the appearance of supposed errors and mistakes in the processed film—complement other qualities frequently associated with 8mm, such as effects of sensuality and material immediacy (said to be less easily generated using the wider film gauges preferred by industrial producers).

Thus, the gradual removal of regular 8mm from the amateur film market can be construed as the elimination of a filmic aesthetic with specific psychological, cultural, and ideological meanings. It is a loss first precipitated not by video but within the film industry itself: as Stark sees it, the process of "severing of the filmmaker's tactile relationship to the medium" commences with the invention and marketing of synch-sound Super 8, the format that introduced film cartridges

requiring no reloading and cameras with automatic light meters and fixed-level sound recording. Described as "consumer appliances . . . built for maximum automation,"[11] Super 8 cameras were highly accessible and standardized, leading another filmmaker to label them "miniaturized Hollywood apparatus[es]."[12]

For the critics of Super 8, its limited features reflected a strong anti-artisanal current in the consumer or amateur filmmaking market, and yet, as the literature on Super 8 output within experimental film amply demonstrates, many filmmakers chose to work within these perceived constraints, keenly aware of Hoberman's point that "the whole aesthetic" of this form of small-gauge cinema amounted to "a series of trade-offs."[13] The smaller filmstrips of Super 8 were more difficult to edit than 16mm, for example, but many reconfigured this supposed limitation as an opportunity to edit in camera and subsequently compared this aspect of 8mm production to "a kind of writing with the camera"[14] or "sketchbook cinema."[15] In addition, for the proponents of Super 8, editing difficulties were far less important than the fact that camera, editing, and projection equipment cost far less than did the equivalents available for wider gauges. As filmmaker Saul Levine describes it, Super 8 was "a very low-capital-intensive medium," one with "democratic" possibilities that remained unrealized "with the advent of video and people's fascination with the electronic image."[16] Since video did not offer low-cost, frame-accurate editing equipment or high-quality, consumer-level projectors for many years, even by the late 1990s a Super 8 specialist could assert that the format had "empowered" filmmakers "in ways that video still hasn't."[17]

This would all seem to confirm the view that experimental filmmakers remained intransigent and uncompromising during the ascent of video. Yet the discourse on Super 8 includes a series of conceptual maneuvers that allowed for the presumed borders between film and video to be reconsidered or circumvented altogether. Instead of rejecting Super 8 cameras for the limits imposed by their "point-and-shoot" design, for instance, other filmmakers embraced the type of automation Stark critiques, in part because it helped to produce effects of immediacy. In addition, the "raw," low-fidelity quality of Super 8 sound recording seemed, in one critic's words, "truer to the overall Super 8 aesthetic."[18] Self-con-

11.   J. Hoberman, "The Super-80s," *Film Comment* 17, no. 3 (May/June 1981), p. 39.
12.   Michael Oblowitz, "Two Avant-Gardes: Privileged Signs, Empty Signs," *Framework* 20 (1983), p. 18. Influenced by structural/materialist film theory, this article criticizes New York's Super 8 "No Wave" filmmakers for their adherence to Hollywood style and ideology. The most recent film by its author is the Val Kilmer vehicle *The Traveler* (2010), distributed by Paramount Pictures.
13.   Hoberman, "The Super-80s," p. 39.
14.   Fred Camper, "The Qualities of Eight," *Cinematograph* 6 (1998), p. 27.
15.   Bradley Eros, "Atomic Cinema," *Cinematograph* 6 (1998), p. 35.
16.   Saul Levine, quoted in Donna Cameron, "Pieces of Eight: Interviews with 8mm Filmmakers," *Cinematograph* 6 (1998), p. 62. This journal issue is also cited in *Big As Life: An American History of 8mm Films*, ed. Albert Kilchesty (San Francisco: Museum of Modern Art, 1998).
17.   Toni Treadway, quoted in Cameron, "Pieces of Eight," p. 71.
18.   Camper, "The Qualities of Eight," p. 29.

sciously incorporating markers of artifice and construction into a given film's design, filmmakers could use the cruder sound techniques of Super 8 to suggest a resistance to professional production standards, a connotation also welcomed by filmmakers who were using PixelVision camcorders in the 1990s.

If a collectively shared feature of small-gauge filmmaking can be identified, it is to be found not in a "Super 8 aesthetic," which suggests the idea of one dominant audiovisual style, but in a guiding impulse to recuperate the format's technical limitations. The reduced dimensions of every element of Super 8 filmmaking, from camera to splicer to screen, were taken to be loaded with special meanings, in the manner of Stark's extolment of 8mm; thus, when filmmaker Lewis Klahr reflects back on his years of Super 8 filmmaking, which yielded approximately sixty films between 1977 and 1993, his references to "intimacy" and "domesticity" have less to do with representational content than with production materials, image quality, and contexts of use. The attributes he assigns to Super 8 were primary topics of discussion within the literature on video art during those years, and he makes the connection with video more explicitly when he observes, "By necessity my aesthetic became TV-like—my work was best watched in a small room with a ten foot throw."[19] Various filmmakers acknowledged similar cross-media affinities, especially after realizing that expertly mastered transfers from Super 8 to analogue video were capable of preserving key aesthetic properties of their films; a few, such as Al Razutis in the 1970s and Clive Holden in the 1990s, exploited such connections in order to make hybrid film/video work the basis of their practice.[20]

As part of the process of evaluating video as a practical option, filmmakers assessed their materials in terms of "trade-offs," as well as the aesthetic constraints imposed "by necessity." Historically, the experimental filmmaker's dependence on a largely indifferent movie industry has certainly generated periodic bouts of "anxiety about the future of film itself and uncertainty as to the direction to take," as Arthur and Corinne Cantrill articulated the problem during another period of perceived crisis, the phasing out of 16mm color-reversal stock.[21] But with each compulsory or elective transition—from reversal to negative film, 16mm to 8mm, regular 8 to Super 8, Super 8 to Hi8 video, Hi8 to miniDV, and so on—filmmakers have reassessed their attachment to a given format and considered the various ideological and aesthetic objections to what is sometimes labeled medium

19. Lewis Klahr, quoted in Cameron, "Pieces of Eight," p. 75.
20. Of course, some filmmakers also insisted that Super 8 was superior to video and that the screening of Super 8 video transfers on a television screen was a "menace." See the quotations from Katerina Thomadaki and Maria Klonaris, "Call for the Defence of Super 8," in Cantrill, "Film—The Medium About to Be Lost," p. 5.
21. Cantrill, "Film—The Medium About to Be Lost," p. 4. A valuable account of the changes that accompanied the shift from reversal to negative film, as well as the complexities of making film "translations" and cross-media transfers, can be found in Janis Crystal Lipzin, "Why Didn't I Work in Granite?," in *Radical Light*, pp. 261–63.

"fetishism." A willingness to consider how Super 8 might overlap with video, practically, conceptually, and aesthetically, allowed experimental filmmakers to see, to a greater degree than they had in the 1960s and early 1970s, where the gains and losses in such transitions might be situated.

Occasionally defining themselves against video artists who show "little or no concept of cinema history," experimental filmmakers tend to endorse the idea that each medium deserves to be kept alive for aesthetic reasons but also given its embeddedness within a singular complex of cultural histories.[22] In moments of transition, however, it also becomes apparent that filmmakers have searched for conceptual and aesthetic points of connection between moving-image media partly in order to develop a practice malleable enough to prevail in the face of obstacles such as the diminished availability of a set of industrially produced materials or technologies. This search can yield metaphors, analogies, and associational meanings, as when the compact cameras of both Super 8 and consumer-grade video, machines small enough to be used often in everyday life, are seen as altering the look of the pro-filmic world in a manner analogous to distillations and distortions of memory. More generally, the attempt to see where and how sensibilities, practices, and aesthetic properties might reappear elsewhere has resulted in a more widespread consideration of the ways in which aspects of different moving-image media can be contained within one medium.[23] This development is part of experimental cinema's long history of forging cross-arts or intermedia relationships, but it is also distinguished from past pursuits by one key motivating factor, the recognition that industrially mandated changes and cycles of technological obsolescence have necessitated an awareness of the strengths and limitations of a broad range of moving-image formats.[24]

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In a taped interview conducted by fellow filmmaker Willie Varela in 1980, Paul Sharits discusses his extensive use of Super 8 and asserts that there is "no reason why Super 8 can't be as good" as wider-gauge formats, although he "hates

22.   Scott Stark, "Rendering Outside the Frame: Film Performance and Installation Art," in *Radical Light*, p. 241.
23.   For a film theorist's version of the notion that "one medium can contain several media," see the discussion of "nested media" in Berys Gaut, *A Philosophy of Cinematic Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2010), pp. 19, 290–91.
24.   In the case of digital video, one of those perceived strengths is its capacity to provide filmic qualities (in any display size) and/or properties that seem specific to video. Thus, as it maintains its appeal for those who seek a unique video medium (see, for instance, the increased use of digital SLR still/video cameras such as the Canon EOS 5D Mark II, whose moving images are reputed to possess qualities not found in digital camcorders or film cameras), contemporary high-definition digital is also flexible enough to simulate filmic imagery convincingly. An awareness of the latter capacity for simulation has led filmmakers such as Matthew McCormick (*Future So Bright*, 2010) to shoot in 16mm and screen finished work in HD transfers (via digital projection, whenever possible).

Ernie Gehr. Crystal Palace. *2002.*

editing in 8."²⁵ Concerned to see greater institutional support for Super 8, Sharits even voices his belief that the Reagan administration, "in honor of [the president's] film career," should fund the upgrade of Super 8 projectors in schools across the country. Despite his appreciation for small-gauge cinema, however, he admits to Varela that he has "no money" and cannot afford to continue making photochemical films.

Nevertheless, Sharits attempts to strike what he considers an optimistic note by raising the topic of the imminent death of not only film but also video. He informs Varela that, within three years, computer-based systems will allow users to "image anything," with "no discs, no nothing. Digital, just a program . . . High resolution, total control." This is the sea change Sharits claims to be "waiting for," and he declares with confidence, "Some day, film and video will be passé, man. But not imaging systems."²⁶ Since Varela still regards Super 8 as his format of choice and video as an inferior alternative, he replies that Sharits's prognostication "sounds terrible," because digital imaging is "not the same as going out in the world and shooting something." But Sharits sees the possibility of continuity in his own digital future: the

25.   Willie Varela and Paul Sharits, "Paul Sharits Conversation 12/30/80," Box 9 Folder 4, Willie Varela Papers, M0785, Dept. of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, California.
26.   Even though Sharits discusses Stan Brakhage during this interview, he does not mention that his own views on digital imaging are prefigured in the "Camera Eye" section of Brakhage's *Metaphors on Vision* (1963), which ends with a discussion of the replacement of the "almost obsolete" film camera with "the IBM and other electronic machines now capable of inventing imagery from scratch." Stan Brakhage, *Essential Brakhage: Selected Writings on Film-Making*, ed. Bruce R. McPherson (Kingston, N.Y.: Documentext/McPherson, 2001), pp. 21–22.

Gehr. Crystal Palace. *2002.*

filmmaker known for scratching and burning filmstrips predicts that he will search for "flaws in the system" and "make an art out of flaws."

Sharits did not live to see the changes to which he had mistakenly assigned such an early date of arrival, but other filmmakers have, and they continue to benefit from the spike in production and creativity he had been anticipating. One remarkable example of a multiplicative increase in output can be found in the filmography of Ernie Gehr. Between 1968 and 1996, Gehr made twenty films; between 2001 and 2011, he has produced over fifty single-channel videos and eight video installations. Even though Gehr would probably not describe his digital work as a search for flaws in the digital system, he has produced one video, titled *Crystal Palace* (2002), that not only suggests a direction Sharits might have taken but, more important, reflects a broader trend toward the incorporation into video of concerns and pursuits first explored and undertaken with photochemical film.

The footage that serves as the basis of *Crystal Palace* was recorded onto miniDV tape with a digital video camera, a Sony model TRV900, in February 2000, during the early stages of a snowstorm in Lake Tahoe. The completed video begins with a tranquil, minute-long image of trees surrounded by white snow, complemented by the sound of a thin stream of water. This carefully composed shot is followed by a series of traveling shots taken from an unseen moving vehicle. During the first five minutes of moving shots, rows of trees occupy much of the frame in close-up, with more trees visible fleetingly in the background. In contrast to the lyricism of the

opening, a digitally edited soundtrack accentuates dissonant noises created by auto-mobile, wind, and other ambient elements. The interplay of foreground and background forms generates different visual effects, as the more proximate trees seem to move more quickly from left to right than the background scene. Contributing to this interplay of depth planes is the all-pervasive snow, which creates the impression that the images have been shot in black-and-white or converted in postproduction into a grayscale palette (later, midway through the video, the appearance of a conspicuously red barn will reveal the natural source of this desaturation effect). Approximately six minutes into the video, longer views of the scenery begin to emerge, and the curving road creates an unpredictable array of variable distances between camera and pro-filmic scene. One effect generated by the turning movements of the vehicle is the intensification of the volumetric presence of the trees, but the heightened sense of physicality is also consistently offset by a visual flattening effect created by the snow.

Based on my highly selective description of *Crystal Palace*, one could assume it to be a traditional landscape film that happens to have been shot, edited, and projected in digital video. In focusing on the imagery seen at a standard frame rate, however, I have omitted an integral aspect of the video, its digital flicker effect. Soon after the video's traveling shots have begun, Gehr periodically interrupts the forward movement of the work with a hybrid freeze frame that presents two frame fields, apparently flashing back and forth in rapid alternation. Video editors would likely recognize the image as an "in between" frame composed of two video fields, a transitional mesh of scan lines easily accessed with digital editing programs. Strikingly, Gehr stops the video in order to generate a locational flicker effect within different regions of the freeze-frame composition, in the areas where the darker portion of one image field (usually showing tree branches) seems to be superimposed over white imagery in the other image field (typically displaying snow).[27] In some of these hybrid images, flickering shapes seem to be rising out of a single plane, such as the middle ground of the scene, while foreground and background appear to remain still. Accompanying these moments, which appear throughout the twenty-eight-minute video, are a range of stuttering or tapping sounds, a sort of percussive correlative to the hybrid picture that draws upon the modified ambient soundtrack and contributes to the mechanical qualities of the visual montage. In Gehr's view, the "imposing" images and sounds of those sequences should provide a strong counterpoint to more "idyllic" aspects of the scene he depicts with the camera.[28]

Flicker effects have been a familiar aesthetic convention within experimental film for nearly half a century, but *Crystal Palace* is distinguished by its

27.   My use of the term "locational" is not intended to evoke Sharits's locational film installations; it refers to the type of interlaced digital flicker that appears only in localized areas of the image.
28.   Ernie Gehr, interview with the author, New York City, May 1, 2011.

exploitation of a method of displaying moving images that is specific to interlaced digital video. Engineers consider the effect a visual distortion or error, an example of digital "artifacting" that is created by flaws in the image-scanning patterns unique to interlaced video, a format now displaced by the progressive method of line scanning. In Gehr's hands, the locational flicker produced by this form of artifacting is, in its sources and its visual design, a reflexive, medium-specific feature of video, while also functioning as one possible iteration of a cross-media optical effect. The locational flicker is also explored in the context of another practice with a long tradition in experimental film, the activity of "going out in the world and shooting something" that Varela was concerned to lose; yet it returns to that tradition with an awareness of what Stark referred to as the "complex and impersonal" aspects of digital imaging. Just as lyricism and a mechanical detachment alternate within the video, the apparently seamless, automatic recording process of the camera is set against Gehr's disruptive montage techniques.

According to Gehr, *Crystal Palace* represents a return to earlier pursuits that had been stymied by technical problems and the absence of sufficient funding. In the late 1960s, Gehr was thinking about "the mechanical nature of the medium and how cinema is dependent upon machines that, quite often . . . seem on the verge of breaking down," as well as "tinkering" with an 8mm projector.[29] After discovering (perhaps around the same time Sharits did) that if the "shutter and the pull-down mechanism of the claw were off," the projector would generate an unsteady image, he rephotographed 8mm film onto 16mm at five frames per second in order to "place emphasis on the frames jumping within the frame," in a continuation of his earlier investigation into "the intervals between frames," first initiated in films such as *Morning* (1967) and *Wait* (1967). For Gehr, the "clearest articulation" of his interest in the mechanical and the intervallic is *Serene Velocity* (1970), but this was soon followed by later attempts at "more elaborate" montage experiments that were too expensive or impractical to execute or complete.[30] The lightness of the digital camera, the precision of desktop video and sound-editing programs, and the relatively low cost of digital materials allowed Gehr to resume his exploration of "greater play between frames" in *Crystal Palace*.[31] In addition, Gehr's video stands now as an

29.   Scott MacDonald, "Ernie Gehr," in *A Critical Cinema 5: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers* (Berkeley: University of California, 2006), p. 368.
30.   MacDonald, "Ernie Gehr," p. 370.
31.   Ernie Gehr, interview with the author. Both *Crystal Palace* and *Cotton Candy* (2001) share characteristics also found in the work of Ken Jacobs, such as the "Rorschach" visuals Gehr sees in the freeze-frame moments of the former and the variable movement of the mutoscope images of human figures in the latter. Given that Gehr's early explorations of frame intervals and retarded movement received some technical assistance from Jacobs, who began to explore similar interests around the same time with his own *Tom, Tom, The Piper's Son* in 1969, it can be said that digital video has also deepened the connections between the work of these two filmmakers.

Gehr. Crystal Palace. *2002.*

early entry in what has become a large and diverse assortment of work by film-makers trained in photochemical film practices who have gone on to search for both continuity and novelty in the digital realm.[32]

   Crystal Palace might be seen as a confirmation of Halter's view that practi-tioners working in video "look both forward and back in time for inspiration," but it is also part of a shift into digital that was motivated largely by Gehr's financial sit-uation, rather than any convictions akin to the belief that "for film, the experiment is over." Yet financial and technological impediments have also affected the ongoing life of the work. A casualty of the video industry's continual upgrading of its projection technology, *Crystal Palace* loses its flicker in the omnipresent progressive-scan displays that automatically "de-interlace" its hybrid freeze frames. The work can still be seen on older video monitors and projectors that do not "correct" the deliberately misaligned fields of its digital flicker effect, but the cost of maintaining and transporting such machines is prohibitive for Gehr. In addition, despite having produced installations in both miniDV and

32.   Montage is signally important for such work, even if only as a practice to be rejected. For filmmakers such as Stark, Ken Jacobs, and Fred Worden, the increased control afforded by digital methods has facilitated an intensified exploration into the possibilities of digital editing. Others have responded to a perceived predominance of complex montage structures in the digital era by working with readymade images and emphasizing process. Examples of the latter include Lynn Marie Kirby's *Latent Light Excavations* series (2003–07) and Rebecca Baron's ongoing *Lossless* series (begun in 2008).

Gehr. Crystal Palace. *2002.*

high-definition video, Gehr is reluctant to convert *Crystal Palace* into a gallery-based video attached to specific technologies of display.

Gehr's wariness is a revealing indicator of the extent to which the theatrical viewing situation has retained its place among the core values of experimental-film culture. Many experimental filmmakers have created work for the art gallery, and they have even allowed films initially intended for theatrical exhibition to be screened as loops in galleries. Yet within experimental film, the ongoing gallery screening remains unassimilable as a dominant mode of presentation and reception.[33] In 2006, Paul Arthur traced experimental film's lasting commitment to theatrical screening back to the formative postwar period, when the institutional stabilization of the American avant-garde ran parallel to the work of

> experimentalists who [who] installed their own highly original forms of subcultural community: workshops, co-ops, screening venues, funding and exhibition affiliations. Consequently, part of the *meaning* of the avant-garde—any given film as well as the movement as a whole—resides in where and how it is consumed by actual viewers. There are no comparable site-specific dynamics, including IMAX, relevant to "commercial moviegoing."[34]

33.   A group of contemporary filmmakers, curators, and programmers discuss these issues in *Projecting Questions? Mike Hoolboom's* Invisible Man *Between the Art Gallery and the Movie Theatre,* ed. Michael Maranda (Toronto: Art Gallery of York University, 2009).
34.   Paul Arthur, "Unseen No More? The Avant-Garde on DVD," *Cineaste* 32, no. 1 (Winter 2006), p. 7.

Arthur observed that this "ethos of unique presentation" had been "reinforced" by expanded-cinema events instead of being undermined by domestic viewing options, and five years later, it seems that, despite the difficulties still being faced by distributors such as Canyon Cinema, the public screening remains the primary venue for contemporary experimental filmmakers.[35] If Gehr succeeds in his search for technicians who can remediate *Crystal Palace* into high-definition video, audiences will be asked once again to commit to seeing the work in a cinema or a space sufficiently similar to one, and they will likely submit to a spectatorial experience with a predetermined start time and a fixed duration.

<p align="center">*</p>

Some observers have advanced the notion that, in the digital era, "we no longer see what we think of as avant-garde film in the same places or the same ways as we did," but if this were the case, then established experimental-film festivals and venues would be undergoing drastic transformations.[36] Various problems and challenges clearly persist, especially in the economies of film printing, distribution, and preservation, but I see no evidence of identity-altering shocks to the system. Smaller-scale changes abound, however, in every aspect of experimental film practice. The question of where and to what degree digital technologies have played a part in shaping the contemporary scene remains an open one, in part because the assimilation of video into that culture remains a fairly recent development and in part because there are so many other factors to consider when taking stock of the present situation. Yet it seems probable that death-of-film rhetoric will continue to be employed as a framework for analyzing and interpreting the digital turn. My remarks here are offered as an alternative view of continuity and change, one that emphasizes the adaptive strategies and processes of negotiation that filmmakers continue to implement with consistency, even as the tradition of declaring the end of experimental-film practice as we know it lives on.

35.   Mike Hoolboom offers an appreciation of both the cinematic viewing situation and later domestic re-viewings in his essay "Notes on Attention, Projection, Foreplay and the Second Encounter (2010)," http://www.mikehoolboom.com/r2/section_item.php?artist=315 (accessed March 1, 2011). Hoolboom's position would likely have been shared, at least in part, by Stan Brakhage, who expressed a wish that digital video could become "an approximate of film, a very close approximate, but be cheap, so people can have it in their homes." Ed Halter, "True Independents: Brakhage and Dorsky Hash Out the Realities of Poetic Cinema," *indieWIRE* (April 30, 2001), http://www.indiewire.com/article/interview_true_independents_brakhage_and_dorsky_hash_out_the_realities_of_p/ (accessed May 1, 2011). Brakhage had articulated similar ideas about screenings in the home in his statements on 8mm film. See his "In Defence of Amateur" (1971), in *Essential Brakhage*, p. 150.
36.   James, "Imposing Technologies," p. 104.